Louis Recchia Interview

This interview took place on October 4th, 2025, at Pirate Contemporary Art in Lakewood, Colorado.

Louis Recchia has been a central figure in Denver's contemporary art scene for more than three decades. His paintings have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, the Brooklyn Museum, the Denver Art Museum, the Absolut Vodka corporate collection and in numerous private collections. Through his homages to animated cartoons, pop culture, and art history, Recchia adopts an almost anthropological lens—probing human experience across time and space and exploring the autobiographical traces embedded in what we value, worship, and discard. This informs my investigation of rock strata as layered experience. He and I have shared space in the Denver arts community for nearly a decade, and conversations with him have sparked many creative undertakings in my own practice. In our conversation, his perspective on representing cartoon characters and pop-cultural iconography offered meaningful support for my thesis research. Also, our conversation wove in many fellow artists and friends and even concluded with two visitors who had wandered into the gallery, folding into our conversation as we finished the interview. This underscores the value I place on relationships, dialogue and interconnection—foundations of my art practice and my life. Hopefully, this spirit came through in the other interviews as well. After pleasantries, banter, and talk about his current show, the interview officially began.

Julie Jablonski: I'm interested to talk to you because of your use of cartoons, caricature and pop culture. Can I ask you first, when did you know you wanted to be an artist?

Louis Recchia: All my life. When I was in Catholic grade school, they brought an art teacher in once a week to work with us. She told my mom to send me to an art school, and my mom, working class family, didn't think that was smart. But when I went to college I majored in art and when I graduated, Zoa and I got married, loaded my van and moved out here instead of going on a honeymoon. I never had a plan B to fall back on. I just always knew I was an artist. When I met Zoe, I told her, "I'm an artist," and she said, "oh, how arrogant." I didn't mean I was Picasso!

As a side note, I just want to tell you, I loved your Velveeta and Twinkie pieces at the found object show. You talk about humor. I came home and told Zoa about your piece because they were so good. I always remember the Frank Gehry piece you did with bubblegum wrapper. You really got a good sense of humor that cuts into the art.

JJ: I think not always, but generally, humor is a quiet undercurrent for Pirate, do you think?

LR: Yeah, I think so.

JJ: I see your work as layered; the paint's layered, the images are layered, maybe the concepts are layered. And I see playfulness. How do you think about your work?

LR: My work is not ha-ha funny. You see a truth in it and that truth is funny sometimes. I think it's a way of reaching people. Like with politics, and the whole thing with Jimmy Kimmel. He reaches people and that's why Trump is afraid of somebody like that. And that's what I try and do. Art makes the world bigger. More than once, people have called me up on the phone who own a piece of mine and say "I just figured out what it meant," and then they educate me.

JJ: You have a lot of art history in your work.

LR: When I first started trying to be an artist, we didn't have any money so most of my life has been lived through art books. I would go to the art library and come back with a stack of books. I was really steeped in art history. Also, I'm from Chicago. When I was a little kid, my parents took me to the Art Institute, and I saw *Afternoon in the Park* by Seurat. That was the first painting that really touched me inside and somehow it stayed with me. When I started trying to seriously be an artist after I graduated, I started painting with pointillism. We were living in South Dakota. I was a member of Vista, like the Peace Corp. We were in Wounded Knee, the insurrection there. The FBI were right outside our driveway. We had no heat or running water and it was the coldest winter on record, like 35 below. We were just locked up in our cabin and the FBI were right there. It was freezing cold. I had time on my hands, so I did a lot of painting. I keep coming back to pointillism and it's because of that first encounter with the Seurat in Chicago.

JJ: You were talking about your usage of found broken mirrors incorporated in your paintings, as a way that we can see ourselves, but fractured. This is interesting to me because for my thesis I'm curious about the idea of a cartoon or distorted representation that fractures an image of reality.

LR: Yeah. In a mirror, you don't see yourself the way other people see you. You're in reverse. I discovered that it has this dual meaning. You're looking out of your eyes.

JJ: I'm thinking about how you sign your name backwards. Is that kind of related?

LR: Yeah, that's one of the reasons I kept doing it. I thought, "this is like looking out, from the inside out." Now it's become a trademark or something. I also enjoy using found objects with the thinking that the stuff we throw away says a lot about who we are and what we value. That kind of ties your idea of the strata and the layers. Our stories, memory and experiences. It pulls in the concept of time.

JJ: What would you consider the lineages you relate to? Obviously, pointillism.

LR: When I was in college, Andy Warhol was my favorite guy. So I used a lot of that kind of imagery because everybody knows clearly what I'm paying homage to. Like when I use Alice in Wonderland, it's something that everybody recognizes.

JJ: What do the cartoons mean to you? One of the paintings of yours that I have, has Mickey Mouse ears amongst other things, like a donkey climbing a tree.

LR: In that particular painting, obviously a horse can't climb a tree, so what's a horse doing up in the tree? I like to do things that are incongruous and why is Mickey Mouse there, just the ears? It's like walking through a door to another dimension. It makes you see something in a different way than you've seen it before. You do that with your work too. Like your Frank Gehry gum wrapper. How many times have you seen a gum tinfoil wrapper on the ground and you don't think anything of it. But after seeing your work, now all of a sudden we see it as a Frank Gehry building. And every time we see a Frank Gehry building, we think of the wrapper. That's how I feel about your Velveeta and Twinkie pieces too.

JJ: And by the way, I'm so glad that the orange came out of the wall. Judith texted in a panic: "The Velveeta is staining the wall!"

LR: Well, Bug had sod on the floor and that stain is still right there. He did the same thing at the old Pirate too. It stained the wood and never came out.

JJ: The anthropological footprint is great to see. Charles was upset because he worked so hard on the floor. Totally fair. But also, there's something kind of cool about the little memory of it.

LR: And also, we're artists, we can live with that.

JJ: This isn't supposed to be some precious, pristine space. That's the whole point. So, I know you paint six days a week, right? You paint very regularly.

LR: Sometimes seven days a week.

JJ: Like six hours a day.

LR: I paint every day. I start with sketching to get ideas while I'm still in that kind of sleepy state of mind. To see what comes out unfiltered. Then I take a shower, have breakfast. Then I get back to work. I like to work as much as I can. It gives me a feeling of peace and fulfillment. If I don't work for a while, I start getting depressed and crabby. I get hard to live with. The other day, I was doing some work on the house for a long time. Zoa said, “go paint some dots and relax.”

JJ: Ha, for everybody’s sake. With the weight of everything in front of us right now, or anytime you've had personal waves in your life, does it shape the content or how you create art?

LR: It does affect my art, but I can’t pinpoint exactly how. It mostly increases my need to do some work.

JJ: What do pop cultural references mean to you?

LR: I think what Warhol did was brilliant. I respond to that. Like how David Salle resurrected it in the seventies and eighties again. As you know, Banksy said if you take imagery from ads, to feel free to do it because otherwise it's like somebody is throwing a stone at you and you have to apologize for picking it up and taking it. Because we are bombarded.

JJ: During Marcus’s show, he said we have a responsibility to be in conversation with art and artists that came before and are currently alongside.

LR: We're standing on the shoulders of those who came before us, hopefully with a more informed view. I just started incorporating fifties sci-fi styled aliens. I like that the word *alien* has a dual meaning. I like the Otherness of it. Not exactly a human being, but similar enough that we can relate to it.

JJ: I've been thinking a lot about that word too, ‘alien,’ and how it is being used before our very eyes. An *alien* is this green creature from somewhere else, and yet, ‘*illegal* aliens’ are (gasp) among us. Those words have weight and literal color to them.

LR: I’m reading a historical novel that takes place in the thirties. It is so much like now, it's blowing my mind. ‘Make Germany great again.’ ‘Make Italy great again.’ Mussolini. The parallel between Hitler and Trump, taking over the democracy, taking over the country. Project 2025. You did that handwriting analysis piece with Trump’s signature. You're touching pop culture a lot too.

JJ: Yeah, I think our work is different, but we definitely speak in the same sensibilities.

Just then, two other artists (as it turned out) came into the gallery, introduced themselves and joined our discussion about art and life, our circle having gotten larger.